

PALMYRA - YESTERDAY AND TODAY

Alvin H. Grobmeier

Palmyra Atoll, 960 miles south by west from Honolulu, one of the Line Islands, is an uninhabited, privately-owned U.S. possession. In February 1940 Pacific Naval Air Base Contractors commenced work and the Naval Air Station Palmyra was established in August 1941. Originally consisting of some 52 islets, 50 of them were joined together by a connecting road causeway. They turned the tropical atoll (213 inches annual rainfall) into a stepping stone airbase to the South Pacific during the early days of World War II.

Navy and Marine Corps personnel manned 5in./51cal. guns, 90mm AA guns, 3in./50cal. Navy guns, 60in. searchlights, 20 and 40mm guns, .50cal. AA MG, .30cal. MG, 37mm guns, 60mm mortars, 81mm mortars, seven M-3 and three M-212 tanks.

The 5in./51cal. seacoast defenses in three batteries of two guns each consisted of Able Battery on Janey Islet, Baker Battery on Home Islet and Charley Battery on Eastern Islet. At 1840 on Dec. 23, 1941 an enemy submarine opened fire on Palmyra, concentrating on the U.S. Engineer Corps dredge Sacramento which was anchored in the central lagoon. The Sacramento was hit, causing minor damage to a boat davit and slight injury to its master from flying splinters. The enemy's fire was returned by 5-in. battery No. 3 (Charley ?) and the enemy submerged after firing six rounds. In January 1945, all of the five inch guns were dismantled and moved to the dock for shipment. Recent air photos of Palmyra show four of the six 5-inch gun blocks at the water's edge, slowly being undermined by the surf.

With a maximum strength of 2,410 personnel in August 1943, the Naval Air Station was disestablished on February 15, 1947. Today, Palmyra is visited occasionally by passing "yachties." Its 6000-ft. Cooper Island runway is mostly overgrown by the jungle, its buildings abandoned and in disrepair (what remains of them), and its connecting causeways breached in many places by the relentless sea. Its owners since prior to 1920, the Fullard-Leo family of Honolulu, put Palmyra up for sale in 1986 for a reported \$16 million. So far, there have been no takers!

NAVY DESTROYS ARMY MINING CASEMATE

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Last year it appeared that the Fort Rosecrans, San Diego, California mining casemate built in 1898 would be spared after some minor demolition and the paving of a parking lot up to its east wall. However, in March 1988 it was completely demolished for the construction of a multi-story bachelor enlisted quarters for the Naval Submarine Base which occupies much of the east side of the old fort. The tunnel connecting the mining casemate and the former post headquarters building apparently remains intact but sealed off at the mining casemate entrance.